

## **Sermon 20c 2019: Shrewd Christians in Service of God**

### **Introduction: Different Types of Christians, But Shrewd**

When most of us think about the quality of Christians sitting next to us on Sundays;

When we think about the personality traits or the values

Of those who make up this community for the world at St. David's Church;

And still other Christians out there around the world;

We use terms like she's a joyful Christian.

She's a joyful Christian who has a deep peace about her;

She knows she's forgiven and freed from the power of sin and death;

She has some kind of living relationship with God in Jesus Christ;

And gladness and happiness just exude from her.

Then there is that serious Christian who is so sincere about God and the Christian life;

But seems preoccupied with their sinfulness or, more likely, the sinfulness of others;

And though they are genuine about our life in God and in community;

You may not want to spend all that much time with them

Or make them the poster child for Christianity.

Maybe it would be better to be a committed Christian, supporting Christ's mission in the world;

Committed to God and supporting the mission and ministry of the church,

Not quite joyful all the time, certainly not overly serious;

But making the effort and touched by the grace and goodness and love of God in a faithful way.

And of course, there's the loving Christian, called to love God and to love their neighbor;

That Christian person who is quick to forgive and see the best in those around them;

Who loves the lovable and the unlovable in the community and in the world;

And is someone you'd like to spend your time with and introduce to others.

There are many other qualities and traits we could apply to being a Christian, but today,  
I want to introduce you to a particular and slightly peculiar quality of the Christian life;  
That Jesus introduces us to in the parable this morning and that is the shrewd Christian.

Now for many of us, the idea of being a shrewd Christian is an oxymoron;  
Two terms that don't seem to fit and may actually feel like opposites in our minds;  
Like other oxymorons: seriously funny, awfully pretty, jumbo shrimp, paid volunteers;  
But in the parable we just heard, Jesus calls on His followers  
To become as shrewd in doing good as others are in doing evil.

According to one dictionary, shrewd means keen-witted, clever or sharp in practical matters;  
And the secondary definition, cunning, and that's the definition most of us think of;  
Someone who uses their intellect or ability to take advantage  
Of a person or a situation in an unethical way or for selfish purposes;  
That would be a very strange Christian example.

Jesus means the former and calls you and me to be as keen-witted, clever and sharp  
In ethical ways, in loving ways and for God's purposes and God's community  
As others, outside our community, are as shrewd in unethical ways and for selfish ends.

### **The Gospel**

The manager in Jesus' story is a shrewd person in the worst sense of the word, cunning;  
He's misuses his masters' resources for his own selfish advantages;  
And he's been found out and told he's going to be dismissed.

Placed in charge of the master's wealth and operations to manage it for him and make a profit;  
He's been skimming off the top, taking more for himself and cheating the master;  
And when he's caught, he doesn't say, oh sorry, I didn't know, I made some mistakes;  
Nor does he admit his sinfulness and repent in hopes of forgiveness.

Instead he ups the stakes and goes all out on the pattern he's already begun;  
Calling in those business people who are in debt to his master;  
He proposes to them to change their bills so that they owe his master less;  
In this way, he hopes to make friends of these people;  
So that they might take care of him once he's dismissed – very shrewd.

And the people who are in debt to the manager's master were shrewd in a cunning sense as well;  
They saw a way to relieve some of their debts and increase their potential profits;  
And not one of them hesitated to take advantage of the situation, much less refuse  
And became further entangled in the manager's shrewd dishonesty.

Now remember, when Jesus tells stories to get a point across,  
He tells of things His audience could relate to and understand;  
Like a lost sheep that that shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to find;  
Or the lost coin the woman searches for persistently.

Jesus didn't seem to need to explain this story;  
As though his listeners would have been no more surprised  
That someone was embezzling from the master or a company or the community;  
Then we are when we hear those kinds of stories in the news today.

The real surprise is the response of the owner, the response of the rich man;  
Who commends the dishonest manager for his shrewdness;  
Sure, he'd been taken advantage of, but he understood the boldness it took  
To embark on a course of even greater dishonesty.

And here's where Jesus makes His first point about being shrewd Christians:  
It's a shame, Jesus remarks, that those who are dishonest

Were more shrewd than those who are honest;

If there were more shrewd Christians who were just as sharp witted and clever;  
Then more people would be coming to a knowledge of the love of God  
And joining in the mission and ministry of God's community.

You see, God created us with minds that can think things out, plan, reason;

And we are called use those God-given powers for good and the best ways possible;  
And especially for God's purposes in our lives and in the life of the world.

One of my best friends in seminary had a poster above his desk

With a very elaborate drawing of Jesus covering most of the poster;  
At the top of the poster were the words, "Jesus came to save all of you";  
And at the bottom were the words, "Don't check your brain at the door".

It really shouldn't be a stretch for the Christian community and individual Christians

To welcome good thinking and this good kind of shrewdness;  
The number of colleges and universities founded by the church  
Over the centuries is vast;  
And Christian orders and organizations have accomplished  
Incredible achievements for the good of the world;  
From keeping learning alive during the middle ages;  
To building organizations that effectively care for the least among us;  
All the while giving people like us important, loving work to share in.

But far too often, when it comes to conducting our affairs in church and in the world;

We can be sloppy and shortsighted;  
Or believe incorrectly that our personal and even worldly wisdom doesn't apply here.

It does;

God has given every one of us talents and gifts and experiences

That may not quite fit the Christian traits of joyful, serious, committed and loving;

But are so important for the mission and ministry of the Church.

And the second point that Jesus goes on to make is that as shrewd Christians;

We have a particular and special calling and purpose for using our cleverness;

That can only be based on serving God and on nothing or no one else.

We are all called to plant ourselves on the bedrock of God and God's kingdom;

Rather than the shifting sands of wealth of any kind;

Be it money, power, prestige, popularity or on anything or anyone else;

We can't serve two masters.

As shrewd Christians we are called to make God our primary focus;

To make justice and peace and love and the compassion of God the core of our lives;

And to be shrewd in the sense of being clever, sharp-witted, and sharp;

About how we spend our time with God and for God;

And about how we go about being a community for the world.

### **Shrewd Christianity**

As God's community for the world, you and I can never lose sight of who it is we serve;

And on God's call for us to use the gifts and abilities, the interests and the experiences

We have been given to draw us and others into the closer presence of God;

To build a community of love and goodness and grace and mercy;

And to reach out to others that they may come to know the life

That we are coming to know with God and one another.

So let me invite you to add being a shrewd Christian to our callings as followers of Jesus.

Oh, we may not want to put it on t-shirts or as a banner on our website;

Since it may make people wonder what exactly it is we are up to;

But we need not check our brains or our gifts or experiences

At the door of the church or the living of the Christian life;

But instead to bring them along and use them for God and God's purposes;

For our lives and for the life of God's world.

Amen.